

*Remarks of Susan DeBisschop
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Before the Education Committee
On Senate Bill 24, Section (29)
(Teacher Tenure)

February 21, 2012

Good afternoon Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischman, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Susan DeBisschop, and I'm a social studies teacher in East Haddam. I am here today to comment on Senate Bill 24, Section 29.

In what other profession is experience seen as an indicator that someone has become complacent in their profession? Would you question a doctor's enthusiasm for their profession and qualifications if they have 10 or 20 years of experience? Currently recent graduates cannot find employment in the business world because they do not have enough experience. And let's not forget to ask the thousands of unemployed or underemployed individuals who cannot get back into their chosen field because they have been laid off. If you haven't been working in the field, you most likely will not be seen as a qualified job candidate because you no longer have experience.

We live in a society that expects expertise, why do we not value the experience of our teachers? Is it perhaps because we have let a few bad examples from the press discredit the majority of hard working professionals who give countless hours before, during and after school to the development of young minds? The committee members who sit before me serve the public honorably. Many of you take pride in the many years of public service and see it as an indicator of your dedication to making a difference in the world. Veteran legislators are valued for their experience in building coalitions both within their caucus and across the aisle. That experience, along with freshman legislators is what makes government work best. Our founding fathers fashioned our government with this purpose in mind; during election years only 1/3 of the U.S. Senate is up for election. In fact, today I look at a committee, a third of which was serving the State of Connecticut over 10 years ago when I worked for one of the caucuses! I respect and applaud you for your dedication and service; why don't people respect teachers for their dedication and service?

I am fortunate to work in a district where my colleagues - some who have been teaching for over 20 years - are the first individuals in the building and the last to leave in the late afternoon. During my career, having worked for three districts total, dedicated teachers who exhibit this behavior are *the norm, not the exception*. In addition to this I also see young professionals who have wonderful strategies and techniques alike. Is experience an indicator of positive student outcomes and success in the classroom? Research would indicate a resounding YES!

The research suggests that when beginning teachers fill vacancies in schools in large numbers, students can be at a disadvantage. Ingersoll (2004), Murnane & Phillips (1981) and Rockoff (2004) all contend that students who are taught by less experienced teachers are less effective. Additionally, according to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003), when experienced teachers leave, schools lose important assets in informal and formal professional development opportunities, tracking students between grades and maintaining relationships with parents and the community. All of these things are imperative to improving teaching capacity and effectiveness in schools. Finally, according to research by Ben Ost of Cornell University (2011), "a teacher who always repeats grade assignments improves 39% more than a teacher who never repeats grade assignments." Research clearly indicates that teachers become more skilled with experience (Rice, 2003; Wayne & Youngs, 2003; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004; Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien, & Rivkin, 2005; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2006; Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Harris & Sass, 2007; Aos, Miller, & Pennucci, 2007; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006, 2007a).

Besides the clear evidence of the importance of teacher experience in the classroom, as a social studies teacher I have a particular interest in teacher tenure. The area of Social Studies undoubtedly requires the discussion of controversial topics. Considering the political climate of a town and the influence of administration, parents and members on the board of education, a teacher can be easily scrutinized for teaching topics that may not be popular. You may recall the infamous Scopes Trial in which John Scopes was forbidden to teach evolution in Tennessee public schools. Some teachers today are being asked to teach Intelligent Design by boards of education rejecting Darwin's theory of evolution. Imagine a situation where a Language Arts teacher is intimidated and criticized because they taught Huck Finn, or a Social Studies teacher who is scrutinized for teaching about the complexities of the Arab Israeli conflict. Tenure gives teachers protection to approach these subjects and be confident students have the academic freedom to pursue, investigate and debate these important issues. As you may recall, tenure was given originally to University professors for exactly the same reason – protecting them in the research of controversial subjects.

I have witnessed myself the pressures from the community. As an experienced teacher who entered a new district I saw problem with plagiarism in my classrooms. I was lucky to have experience and the support of administration to overcome parental pressure. Without this support I see too many teachers today succumb to expecting less of their students. All a parent needs to do today is threaten legal action (it has happened to be at least twice during my 12 year career) regarding plagiarism issues. We need teachers to feel they can be strong against such pressures and stand up for academic honesty and academic freedom.

Finally, tenure provides teachers an opportunity to have the honest, open dialogue about instructional strategies and concerns with administrators. It gives them the courage to express concerns with administration without the fear of being terminated for their professional judgment and experience. Ultimately, tenure allows

teachers to express unpopular ideas and concerns. Teachers welcome administrators into their classrooms. In fact, we do not see them in our classrooms enough. We want administration to see the accomplishments we have daily and the struggles our students endure as well. But again, teachers need to be able to have open dialogue with administration. I have seen unfortunate circumstances in which administrators get their opinions about teachers through rumor or reputation alone, not through fact finding and observation over time. All too often I have seen teachers targeted for expressing what may be considered an unpopular idea.

Tenure, as you are aware, is not what the public believes it to be. I implore you to consider the consequences of school systems that do not provide teaching professionals the due process they deserve. Tenure does not just protect teachers. Rather, tenure protects academic freedom and encourages the development and growth of faculty through the sharing of expertise. Our students deserve public schools to be places that are stable environments. Teachers deserve to be respected, just like any other professional for their expertise. Contrary to what Governor Malloy believes, I did not get tenure just by showing up for four years. Rather, I am a professional who cares about the profession, expects quality of myself, my colleagues and my students. I ask you not support Senate Bill 24. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Susan DeBisschop

Social Studies Teacher